

## **“What I’m not gonna buy”: algorithmic culture jamming and anti-consumer politics on YouTube**

‘I feel like a lot of YouTubers hyperbolise all the time, they talk about how you *need* things, how important these products are for your life and all that stuff. So, I’m basically going to be talking about how much you *don’t* need things, and it’s the exact same thing that everyone else is doing, except I’m being extreme in the other way’.

So states Kimberly Clark in her first ‘anti-haul’ video (2015), a YouTube vlog in which she lists beauty products that she is ‘not gonna buy’.<sup>1</sup> Since widely imitated by other beauty YouTube vloggers, the anti-haul vlog is a deliberate attempt to resist the celebration of beauty consumption in beauty ‘influencer’ social media culture. Anti-haul vloggers have much in common with other ethical or anti-consumer lifestyle experts (Meissner, 2019) and the growing ranks of online ‘environmental influencers’ (Heathman, 2019). These influencers play an important intermediary function, where complex ethical questions are broken down into manageable and rewarding tasks, projects or challenges (Haider, 2016: p.484; Joosse and Brydges, 2018: p.697). At the same time, this type of media content can focus on privileged individual consumer choices, at the expense of a political understanding of the structural and social transformation required to address the harms of unsustainable consumer capitalism (Meissner, 2019). This paper undertakes textual analysis of anti-haul YouTube videos, as a way to explore the broader political questions surrounding the possibilities, limitations, and contradictions of anti-consumer politics among influencers on social media platforms.

As explored below, Google owned YouTube is deliberately designed to popularise commercially viable, advertiser friendly content (Bucher, 2018). However, our contemporary cultural moment is also characterised by mounting distrust in global corporations and capitalist economies (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2015). Commodity activism – such as consumer boycotts and the demand for Fair Trade or zero waste products – is a key area for mobilisation (Murdock, 2013). The development of sustainable resource use and reduced environmental and social exploitation is ‘dependent on the emergence and embrace of new modes of thinking’ that are popular (Soper, 2008: p.571), widely communicated (Goodman et al., 2016), and, crucially, state regulated (Shove, 2010). Social media platforms are a key site through which discourses of resistance and alternatives to consumerism can emerge, but only if they are able to become visible on profit driven communication platforms.

This paper contends that the success of beauty anti-haul videos relies on their effectiveness within the algorithmic governance of YouTube. Anti-hauls represent efforts to strategically manipulate the popularity mechanics of a platform. As I explore, gaining visibility for an anti-haul video involves similar strategies to any other beauty

influencer YouTube vlog. As Clark states in her first anti-haul, 'it's the exact same thing that everyone else is doing, except I'm being extreme in the other way' (2015). In this respect, anti-haul vloggers have much in common with 'culture jamming' movements, which use the communicative practices and materials of promotional culture against itself (Humphrey, 2010).

In this paper, I argue that anti-hauls can be understood as the reinvention of 'culture jamming' techniques for a contemporary promotional culture that is platform based, algorithmically governed, and mobilised through the affective, authentic performance of influencers. I refer to this manipulation of the platform's visibility mechanisms to spread anti-consumer messages as 'algorithmic culture jamming'. Originating with the Situationist strategy of 'détournement' in the 1950s (Wettergren, 2009), culture jamming is a tactical re-appropriation of promotional culture that seeks to mobilise collective resistance to, and subversion of, unsustainable consumption (Lekakis, 2017). As the term suggests, culture jamming has involved communication strategies such as 'subvertising', billboard 'liberation' and 'shopping interventions' that seek to 'jam up', divert, or resist the flow of consumer saturated media and so challenge the 'dominant ideology of consumerism' (Sandlin and Milam, 2008). Events such as 'Buy Nothing Day' have encouraged collective involvement in resisting imperatives to consume (Sandlin and Milam, 2008). Anti-hauls are a continuation of these strategies for a new promotional landscape. Vloggers use the algorithmic governance and communicative norms of YouTube to gain recognition and visibility for videos with an anti-consumerist message.

Given that culture jamming requires knowledge and adoption of the communicative techniques, language and style of consumer capitalism, it always runs the risk of re-incorporation by that which it seeks to subvert (Sandlin and Milam, 2008; Lekakis, 2017). The analysis explores the multiple ways in which anti-haul discourses are stripped of their political potential in favour of a highly individualistic performance of consumer choice and savvy. At the same time, culture jamming is an important political intervention precisely because of its proximity to, and co-optation of, the emotional register of consumer capitalism (Wettergren, 2009). Through an emphasis on fun, hyperbole, and creativity, anti-haul vloggers offer an engaging, accessible, and pluralistic space with potential for political learning (Sandlin and Milam, 2008) and personal and collective transformation.

I refer to anti-hauls as examples of 'anti-consumerism' throughout this paper, even though the influencers who make these videos do often participate enthusiastically in the consumption and use of beauty products. At the same time, all the anti-hauls examined express some degree of scepticism, critique, or reluctance to participate fully in the kinds of celebratory consumption found in the typical beauty 'haul' video. Often these forms of critique are limited in scope and, as explored in the analysis, prone to slipping into individualistic discourses of 'not for me', 'too much stuff', or 'smart shopping'. Nonetheless, I understand the term 'anti-consumerism' to encompass

these kinds of partial, flawed, or contradictory critiques of consumerism (Humphrey, 2010; Portwood-Stacer, 2012) 'from within' (Thomas, 2008).

The paper begins by outlining the context of beauty YouTube vlogging and describing the methodology. I then turn to the algorithmic culture jamming strategies used, identifying four mechanisms through which anti-haul vloggers gain visibility. Following this, I explore the reasons that anti-haul vloggers identify for reducing and refusing unrestrained consumption, and how they persuade themselves and viewers to participate. This part of the analysis opens up a discussion of the potential and limitations of the anti-consumer politics in the videos. Finally, I turn to the forms of creativity and resourcefulness celebrated by anti-haul vloggers, arguing that they offer a form of 'alternative hedonism' (Soper, 2008) beyond the cycle of continual consumption celebrated elsewhere in influencer culture.

## **YouTube hauls and anti-hauls**

Over the past fifteen years, YouTube has moved from a participatory platform, which encouraged users to upload amateur content and click on videos, to a professionalised platform which fosters the trajectory of commercial 'stars', and keeps viewers on the platform (Bucher, 2018). This transformation has been intentionally facilitated by YouTube through various mechanisms (Bucher, 2018) including: changes to the algorithm which determines the videos that users see in recommendations and searches; explicit instruction on how to create 'advertiser friendly' content; punishments such as de-monetisation and shadow banning; and initiatives including the partner programme and creator studios (Banet-Weiser, 2017). Like other social media platforms, YouTube should be understood not as a facilitator of public discourse, but as constitutive of it through shaping of user 'participation toward certain ends' (Gillespie, 2018: p.22).

Those 'A list' (Bishop, 2018b) beauty 'content creators' who can build successful commercial brands become highly lucrative entrepreneurs. YouTube beauty vloggers have been described as ideal economic subjects, both as entrepreneurs and consumers (Banet-Weiser, 2017). A range of vlog genres emphasise an intensive programme of consumption, including: tutorials; sponsored videos; 'tours' of large make-up collections; 'challenges'; and 'hauls'. 'Hauls' involve vloggers showing and describing a selection of purchased products, discussing why they bought each item. Hauls can be found across influencer driven social media, from fashion to homeware. They celebrate accumulation and newness, fitting with popular 'fast fashion' trends that foster desire to keep up with an unending cycle of 'new stuff' (Schor, 2010).

As the title of British vlogger Zoella's video – 'HUGE Boots haul' (2016) – suggests, the pleasure of consumer excess is key to the haul's appeal. Moments of revelling in 'having beyond what we need' are one of the central pleasures of contemporary

consumer culture (Humphrey, 2010: p.163). 'Haul' videos should be understood less as cynical advertisements – though they can be sponsored or contain affiliate links – and more as mobilisations of intimate relations through the medium of consumption; with videos seeking to emulate the social experience of pulling items out of shopping bags with a friend. Successful vloggers cultivate their fans' sense of emotional intimacy, trust and closeness not only with their own online personas, but with the brands they 'love' (Berryman and Kavka, 2017). However, a negative audience reaction can result if a vlogger is seen to cross the boundary from 'recommending' into *inauthentically* 'overly advertising' (Garcia-Rapp, 2017: p.127). It is in this context that anti-consumption discourses thrive on beauty YouTube through the trend for anti-haul videos. In each anti-haul video, the creator speaks direct to camera, discussing in turn a series of products – promotional images of which are usually edited into the video – that they plan not to buy and why.

This paper draws upon textual analysis of twenty-three YouTube anti-haul videos. These were collected in 2019 through YouTube searches and recommendations, and by identifying vloggers discussed on the 'MakeupRehab'<sup>ii</sup> subreddit. All of the anti-haul YouTubers discussed are based in the United States, and the majority, though not all, are young white women. It is important to note that the beauty YouTubers who produce anti-hauls are not generally among the most popular. Kimberly Clark, for example, has nearly 75,000 subscribers and her most popular anti-hauls have around 150,000 views (Clark, n.d). In 2017 a number of YouTubers with larger subscriber numbers made one-off anti-haul videos; Jackie Aina (2017) and Tati (2017) each attracted over 1.4 million views. The most popular beauty Youtubers have vast subscriber numbers and view counts: Jeffree Star has over 14 million subscribers (Star, n.d) and Zoella has over 3.4 million views for a haul (2016). However, anti-hauls have gained attention from media outside YouTube, with articles in publications such as *Bitch* (Zeisler, 2019), the *Guardian* (Rigby, 2019), *Allure* (Forbes, 2017) and the *Telegraph* (Hall, 2017).

### **Algorithmic culture jamming strategies**

Content favoured by YouTube's algorithm appeals to clearly defined and commercially viable demographics of viewers (Bishop, 2018a), and seeks to keep viewers on the platform in a continual 'flow' of videos (Pietrobruno, 2018). A notable body of research has addressed the practices of social media influencers who endeavour to 'play the visibility game' (Cottor, 2018) or 'algorithmically self-optimize' (Bishop, 2018a) by being 'algorithmically recognizable' (Gillespie, 2017: p.64). For influencers who rely on social media for their income – or aspire to (Garcia-Rapp, 2017) – the necessity of maintaining visibility, and the risks of losing it, are significant (Bucher, 2012). As Bishop notes (2019: p.3), maintaining algorithmic 'complicity' is an 'ongoing project' for vloggers. Although scholarship has cautioned against overly valorising the deterministic power of the 'black boxed' algorithm (Gillespie, 2017), research with social media content creators suggests that speculation and research about, and the

development of strategies to comply with algorithmic governance are major components of their labour (Abidin, 2016; Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2017; Cotter, 2018). The 'algorithmic imaginary' therefore plays a productive role in shaping the content that vloggers and other social media influencers produce (Bucher, 2017).

Anti-haulers use the promotional algorithmic mechanisms and influencer centred values of YouTube to gain visibility for their critique of the hyper-consumerist, influencer driven beauty economy. The following sections identify four 'algorithmic culture jamming' strategies through which anti-haul vloggers gain visibility and popularity for their videos through adhering to the algorithmic and cultural norms of beauty YouTube: keeping up with new products; participating in YouTube 'drama'; performing authenticity; and affective intensity. I then turn to an examination of the anti-consumer politics in the videos.

#### Keeping up with new products

Successful 'A list' creators produce high production value videos featuring up-to-date products (Bishop, 2018b: p.91). Anti-hauls allow YouTubers with smaller subscriber numbers to create videos about new products without buying or being sent promotional items. Abby Williamson's anti-haul (2019a) features the names of brands and images of products in the video thumbnail and the title: 'ANTI-HAUL #16 | Colourpop, Huda Beauty, and Kylie are at it AGAIN'. Although the video content is critical, it also keeps pace with new releases and popular brands that are likely to be appearing in contemporaneous searches and videos. In addition to thumbnail and title, keyword tags coded on videos determine the appearance of those videos in search and recommendation rankings (Bishop, 2018a). The keywords for a Kimberly Clark anti-haul include "too faced", "chocolate gold", "kylie", "lilumia" and "morphe" (Clark, 2017), making it possible for the video to appear to viewers searching for, or watching other videos about, those brands and products. Anti-hauls, then, represent a form of anti-consumerism that can flourish as part of the preferred consumer content that YouTube's algorithm favours, avoiding the punishment that would likely result should the videos not fit with the 'algorithmically recognized genres', search terms and keywords prevalent among beauty YouTube content (Bishop, 2018b: p.81).

#### Participating in YouTube 'drama'

The critical tone of the anti-haul can drive views and visibility by dovetailing effectively with the spectacle of YouTube 'drama' (Burgess and Green, 2008). Popular YouTube 'drama' channels are entirely devoted to the discussion of beauty influencer feuds and controversies. Vlogger Jackie Aina's (2017) anti-haul featured a segment explaining that she would never buy fellow YouTuber's brand Jeffree Star Cosmetics due to Star's record of 'anti-blackness'. Star subsequently blocked Aina on social media and Tweeted that she was an 'irrelevant rat' (Vikeejeah, 2017). This reflects a tendency on

beauty YouTube, and indeed across social media celebrity culture, for racism to be dealt with only as 'drama' and 'call outs', leaving little room for the 'broader social implications of racism within the beauty community' be meaningfully addressed (Lawson, 2020: p.4).

The title of Clark's (2019) anti-haul 'ANTIHAUL #19 — CORPORATE PRIDE (FT. JACLYN HILL!)' features the name of an 'A list' YouTuber who had shortly before the video's release been involved in a controversy involving a faulty product launch. This was widely commented on by 'drama' channels at the time. In the vlog, Clark states that Jaclyn Hill was 'the reason you probably clicked on this video', and saves her brief discussion of the topic for the final part of the video, showing an awareness that the audience, and the algorithm, are likely to favour a vlog that participates in the controversy. In addition, anti-haul video thumbnails often mirror the generic conventions of sensational videos from drama channels – featuring an image of vlogger frowning, shrugging, pointing their thumbs down, looking shocked or disgusted, and surrounded by superimposed negative emojis and captions such as 'YIKES!' or 'SERIOUSLY?' (see, for example, thumbnails by Thomas Halbert, n.d). Undoubtedly the participation in drama – and the melodramatic spectacle of criticising brands and the high-profile YouTubers who own, collaborate with, or promote those brands – helps to connect videos and vloggers in a network, driving views and recommendations.

### Authenticity

As research on beauty vlogging shows, values of 'authenticity' are key to maintaining trusted, intimate relationships between vlogger and viewer (Garcia-Rapp, 2017). This 'authenticity labour' (Bishop, 2018b) involves allowing seemingly 'behind the scenes' (Marwick and Boyd, 2011) glimpses such as: including 'mistakes' in the edit; filming videos with no, or little, make-up in domestic settings; and making videos that expose the vloggers mental health vulnerabilities (Bishop, 2018b). For most beauty influencers, perceptions of honesty, trustworthiness, and 'realness' can be mobilised into commercial arrangements (Khamis et al., 2017; Berryman and Kavka, 2017). For the anti-haul vlogger, authenticity is mobilised into the promotion of reducing or refusing the consumption of beauty products.

Discussion of attempts to save money or resist the aspirational marketing of luxury products offers a further level relatability to be performed. Given their positions within the beauty industry, it is not surprising that few of the very top 'A' list beauty YouTubers have filmed anti-haul videos. Instead these videos are the realm of the YouTuber who is a consumer more 'like you'. Alexis Brianna (2019a) states that she won't buy a body highlighter from the brand Fenty because they are designed only for 'Instagram models', not a 'normal' person; and states that she won't buy a product because, '\$60, that's my phone bill' (Brianna, 2019b). A 'behind the scenes' atmosphere is created

through techniques such as the inclusion of 'outtakes' in the video edit (for example see Williamson, 2019a).

Anti-haulers perform vulnerability and relatability as they try to resist the appeal of alluring products. Abby Williamson (2019a) discusses 'seductive' packaging of 'gorgeous' products she would love to buy but 'won't fall for'. Julia Mazzucato (2019) states that 'I kind of use these [videos] to talk myself out of buying things'. The anti-haul builds on the kind of authentic relationships that are familiar and appealing to a beauty vlogging audience, but directs those relationships in a different direction, towards resisting and reducing consumption. In so doing, anti-haulers draw on culture jamming strategies that position the seeming pleasure of consumption as false, hollow and unfulfilling, and frame the anti-consumer as in fact more authentic, unique and 'real' (Wettergren, 2009).

#### Affective intensity

Beauty vlogger Williamson states that in her anti-hauls she is 'using hyperbole to counteract consumerism' (2019a). The performance of 'extreme' (Clark, 2015) and exaggerated negativity towards products and brands in the anti-haul video is key to their appeal. These techniques call to mind the use of 'stylistic exaggeration' in culture jamming messaging, used to playfully and provocatively subvert the dominant rhetoric of cultural forms (Harold, 2004). Beauty videos on YouTube are, as Clark suggests, often highly celebratory of beauty brands. In deliberate contrast – one that may feel refreshing for viewers – the anti-haul embraces negative views on products expressed in exaggerated and hyperbolic fashion.

Clark refers to items as 'bullshit' 'a rip-off' 'terrible' and 'boring' in one video (2015), and Shelbizleee (2019b) says that she is 'shaking' with anger and 'so mad' over a wasteful product that she thinks is 'a piece of shit'. As in 'unboxing' videos, in which 'reviewer, viewer and object' become similarly oriented in a 'shared intensity of feeling' (Mowlabocus, 2018), the anti-haul creates affective intimacy. The viewer is invited to join in a negative intensity of feeling through enjoying hyperbolic exclamations of how unnecessary, wasteful or overpriced something is. The shared affective intimacy into which the viewer is drawn may provide much of the draw and (re)watchability of these videos (Mowlabocus, 2018).

Anti-hauls, then, can be seen as the reinvention of 'culture jamming' techniques for a contemporary promotional culture based on seeking visibility on algorithmically managed platforms, and operationalised through constructed intimate, authentic feeling relationships with influencers. Given that culture jamming is 'dependent on the logic of capitalism to publicize its cause' (Stolle and Micheletti, 2015, cited in Lekakis, 2017), it can easily be incorporated into consumer capitalist discourse. As Lekakis argues, it is crucial to focus on what is actually '*challenged and changed*' (2017, emphasis added) through the culture jamming process of appropriating the channels

and messages of promotional culture. Though they use many of the same techniques to gain visibility and popularity, anti-hauls, unlike other beauty YouTube vlogs, explicitly invite and encourage viewers to join the vlogger in the action of reducing and resisting consumption. The following sections turn then to the political potential and limitations of the anti-consumer politics in the videos, allowing for a consideration of how anti-hauls conflict, or evade conflict, with the consumerist messages that are so deeply embedded in beauty vlogging networks.

### **The anti-consumer politics of anti-hauls**

Anti-haul vlogger Whitney Hedrick claims that the beauty industry and beauty YouTube promote 'compulsive, unnecessary, unadulterated consumerism' (Hedrick, 2019a). The anti-haul video seeks to resist popular beauty consumerism on both 'material and discursive' levels (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: p.95). Through the vloggers' performance and the relationship with the viewer, the videos seek to present an alternative model of the modern self, fuelled by motivations apart from the cycle of consumer desire and dissatisfaction, with its corollary production of excess and waste (Reith, 2018). As vlogger Abby Williamson states:

'It's a way to counteract the overwhelming consumerism that gets thrown in your face everywhere on YouTube, whether it's, like, unboxings or huge hauls or just beauty influencers talking about all the newest things and they're like, "I want this and I want that, and you have to buy this, and you have to get this, and oh my god you can't live without this". So anti-hauls are the antithesis of that.' (2019a)

Anti-hauls, however, are not about turning away from beauty consumption altogether. As examined below, the creators participating in these anti-consumer discourses retain knowledge and passion about make-up as central facets of their personas. Clark frames her anti-consumerism thus:

'We live in a capitalist society and unless you want to completely separate yourself from that society you are forced to participate in it no matter what. I think it's more interesting to investigate *how* we participate in that society' (Clark, 2016)

Anti-hauls must therefore be understood as resistance to consumer capitalism 'from within' (Thomas, 2008: p.681). The videos evidence 'ambivalence and disquiet' (Thomas, 2008: p.681) with consumer culture, and, by way of a solution, promote efforts to refuse and reduce consumption. Clearly, there are significant limitations to consumer choice as a vehicle for political and social change (Lekakis, 2013). While some vloggers are careful to highlight this (for example Shelbizleee, 2019a) the political project of anti-hauls lacks the kind of sustained and intentional systemic critique of capitalism that can be found elsewhere culture jamming activism (Lekakis, 2017). Moreover, the political values and messages of anti-haul vloggers vary widely.



In common with other anti-consumerist texts, anti-hauls represent a seeming 'grab bag of concerns and intentions' (Humphreys, 2010: p.166), scarcely united by an often-unarticulated common principle of consumption as a route to social justice.

The vlogs are not just personal accounts of reducing consumption, they directly seek to encourage the viewer to do the same. As a Thrifty Beauty (2018) anti-haul states, the goal is to 'talk you out of' buying something. Shelbizleee (2019a) states that 'the single most impactful thing you can do as a consumer is to shop less'. Kimberly Clark explicitly aims to unite viewers in anti-consumer action stating in a video that: '*together* we can focus not on what's missing but on what we already have' (2016). In this, anti-hauls avoid wholly individualising consumer choice, instead emphasizing the importance of *collective* efforts of consumers (Littler, 2005). There is undoubtedly an individualism to the anti-consumerism of anti-hauls, but it is one that builds on a sense of the individual in relation to others, as part of a loosely united collective.

This approach has been described as 'individualized collective action' (Micheletti, 2003, cited in Lekakis, 2013) or 'collective individualism' (Humphrey, 2010), to refer to 'types of political action subject to solitary experiences imagined as collective in the private realm of the market' (Lekakis, 2013: p.326). Like other culture jamming actions such as 'Buy Nothing Day', anti-hauls seek to unite producers and audiences in a community drawn together by this collective sense of purpose (Sandlin and Milam, 2008), but practiced through individual actions. This shows a critical awareness that 'individual practices play a role in societal change' (Joosse and Brydges, 2018: p.697) and draws on long radical traditions of the personal as political (Humphrey, 2010: p.54). The following sections examine in detail the reasons *why* anti-haul vloggers claim consumption should be reduced, and *how* they go about engaging and persuading consumers (and themselves) to resist and reduce purchases of beauty products. The analysis is divided into five themes: politics of representation; environment; 'not for me'; 'too much'; and shopping 'smart'.

### Politics of representation

These critiques centre on the representation of gender, race, and sexuality in the beauty industry. The 'shade range' of skin toned products like foundation, concealer and contour is sometimes cited as the reason for not buying a brand or product (for example by Holdcroft, 2019). In some cases, a limited shade range has led to a major controversy for particular brands (Lawson, 2020) but, as discussed above, these kinds of 'call outs' can become subsumed in the spectacle of 'drama' (Lawson, 2020). The gendered beauty norms of the industry are also a focus in anti-hauls. Whitney Hedrick (2019a) highlights a range of products that promise to 'correct' problems 'you didn't know you were supposed to have'. Clark (2016) explains that marketing re-enforces binary gender roles that are 'constricting and limit us', stating that beauty industry 'uses gender and fear to its advantage'. In a Pride month anti-haul on 'corporate Pride', Clark

(2019) critiques branded charity make-up collections, concluding that ‘when I see my community exploited for corporate gain, I’ve got to do something’. These kinds of anti-haul narratives, then, suggest that beauty consumption is being framed within a critical awareness of social justice issues in relation to LGBTQ rights, anti-racism and feminism.

At the same time, this approach fits within what Banet-Weiser (2015) describes as an ‘economy of visibility’, where there is audible demand for individuals and groups to be ‘seen’, ‘heard’ and represented as a political end *in itself*. Representation becomes the primary issue, without an accompanying political agenda that points to the systemic issues that shape the conditions for representation. For example, while a more inclusive range of foundation shades would undoubtedly have an important impact for darker skinned consumers, there is no critique here of the racial injustices perpetuated by the global labour conditions under which make-up is designed and produced (Arboine, 2019).

#### Environment

A notable number of vloggers foreground an explicitly environmental perspective. Self-described ‘eco-minimalist’ and zero waste vlogger Shelbizleee (2017) critiques beauty influencers who are ‘polluting our earth by creating a demand for make-up products’. Increasingly, vloggers call attention to the excessive waste produced through the widespread practice of brands sending PR packages of products to beauty influencers. As ‘PR unboxing’ videos show, PR packages often involve excessive packaging, and include an entire product line for the purpose of ‘swatching’ (filming or photographing products on the skin). Vlogger Samantha Ravndahl (2019) announced that she had contacted brands to remove her name from PR lists because of the levels of waste generated, describing packaging that couldn’t be recycled and extra gifts. Similarly, Thomas Halbert (2019) describes the job of an influencer as ‘very wasteful’, stating that he has contacted brands to request they send minimal packaging and only selected items.

Clark (2016) explicitly connects the make-up industry to climate change, discussing the impact of the shipping industry, packaging, and ‘the environmental costs of manufacturing and obtaining raw materials’. Like other popular discourses of environmental anti-consumerism, anti-hauls tend to invest heavily in the power of individual agency to enact social change (Littler, 2005), reflecting the ways in which consumer capitalism engenders us to ‘accept consumption as the ultimate horizon’ of our ability to intervene (Thompson, 2012). Some anti-haul influencers do show an awareness of the limited environmental impact that can be made by individual efforts to reduce consumption, yet still continue to emphasise the importance of individual action within a broader understanding of the need for social transformation. This form of collective individualism (Humphrey, 2010) is captured by Shelbizleee (2019a) who

concludes that 'you cannot do all the good that the world needs, but the world needs all the good you can do'.

### 'Not for me'

Not all reasons given for not buying products have a social justice or environmental justification behind them. Charlotte Holdcroft (2019) explains that she won't buy a very large eyeshadow palette because 'it's not a "me" type of palette but I totally see the attraction for other types of people'. Other vloggers speak about not using particular kinds of colours or formulations of products that don't fit with their skin type, style or other make-up habits and routines (see for example RawBeautyKristi, 2019). These critiques suggest less awareness of the collective individualism described above, deferring instead to a more familiar discourse of consumer choice and individual taste.

Often the assertion that a product is 'not for me' comes as part of the disclaimers often found in anti-haul videos. The common use of disclaimers suggests a fear of being seen as unfair by audiences. RawBeautyKristi (2019) explains that her anti-haul expresses her own opinion and is not intended to offend, asking viewers to 'let me know what you think, am I just being a shit?'. Similarly, Lee (2019) asks viewers to 'hear me out before you think I'm being too negative' and Holdcroft (2019) reassures that 'we all have different tastes and preferences'. Vloggers warn viewers that they might 'come across a little ranty' (TotalMakeUpJunkie101, 2019) and to stay away if this is not 'your type of humour' (Holdcroft, 2019). Bishop (2018b: p.100) notes the 'vitriolic response' from viewers that can arise when a vlogger 'performs anything other than an authentic femininity that also conforms to industry norms, prioritising the protection of brands'. Anti-haul vloggers use of personal preference as a kind of defensive disclaimer suggests an awareness that caution is needed when taking a critical tone, even in the 'hyperbolic' context of an anti-haul.

### 'Too much'

Anti-haul vloggers frequently describe feelings of being overwhelmed, both by new releases from beauty brands and their own collections. As two anti-haul videos state: 'I have more palettes than I could ever use in a lifetime' (RawBeautyKristi, 2019); 'I know I have enough of those eyeshadows for an eternity' (TotalMakeUpJunkie101, 2019). Some vloggers make videos pledging to go on a 'no buy' for a set duration (Ravndahl, 2019), highlighting the personal and financial benefits of halting consumption. Whitney Hedrick reflects that, before going on a 'no buy', she felt that 'this stuff was starting to own me' (Hedrick, 2019a), and 'all of us women are entirely too smart to be going into debt over lipgloss'. As Meissner (2019: p.198) argues, 'minimalist' lifestyle influencers can avoid complex understandings of accumulation by framing the issue merely as the privileged individual's struggle with 'clutter' and 'too

much'. However, Clark draws a connection between individual struggles with 'too much' and wider social issues when she states:

'You're probably aware of consumerism's dark side if you have any credit card debt or you look around and you just have too much stuff, but even if the constant demand for things doesn't really effect you personally or your bank account, your personal consumerism definitely effects many other people' (Clark, 2016).

However, a spate of 2019 videos discussing the increased frequency of new product releases from some brands focused less on themes of consumerism, and more on the tarnishing of brand image. RawBeautyKristi (2019) states bluntly that 'the insane amount of launches' means that 'there's too much fucking make-up'. Describing one brand as 'the fast fashion of make-up', she complains that the volume of releases 'takes away excitement' for the consumer (RawBeautyKristi, 2019). Other vloggers suggest that 'everyone is super tired right now of new brands coming out' (Mazzucato, 2019); 'There's nothing to get excited about because you're constantly being bombarded' (Ravndahl, 2019); 'I haven't even been able to enjoy one palette and now there's three' (Halbert, 2019). This suggests a sense of disillusionment with the pleasures of excessive consumption, lamenting the loss joy in buying luxury, exclusive products.

### Shopping 'smart'

Shopping 'smart', the most frequently identified theme, involves mobilising consumer expertise and knowledge into making the 'right' beauty purchases. As cultural intermediaries (Joosse and Brydges, 2018), influencers' deployment of consumer knowledge in making recommendations and sifting through the volume of options is key. Anti-haul videos often point out the techniques that beauty brands use to market similar commodities. For example, Charlotte Holdcroft (2019) includes an image in her anti-haul of an eyeshadow palette with four shades blocked out to demonstrate that 'when you see that you will realise that you have every other shade in this palette times four hundred'. In other videos, vloggers highlight how eye-catching or 'luxury' packaging is used to justify a higher price for the 'same ingredients' (RawBeautyKristi, 2019; Brainna, 2019b). Anti-hauls often refer to other reviews that have described the poor quality of products (Clark, 2015; Holdcroft, 2019), and raise specific ingredients that have a tendency to cause irritation or allergies (Holdcroft, 2019; RawBeautyKristi, 2019).

Smart shopping also involves being critical of high cost of products where it is not perceived to be justified (Holdcroft, 2019). This involves knowledge of the beauty industry and manufacturing, where products are marked up by brands because 'really you are paying for the name' (RawBeautyKristi, 2019) or the launch is 'just a money

grab' (TotalMakeUpJunkie101, 2019). In general, then, anti-haulers take up a position as a sceptical, informed and savvy consumers who 'tend to always question everything' (RawBeautyKristi, 2019) and caution viewers to 'think before you buy' (Hedrick, 2019b). For some, like Clark (2016), being a 'smart' shopper is explicitly linked to anti-consumerism:

It's often thought of as exhausting to be a smart consumer, to know where our products are coming from, how they were made, what impact they have on your carbon footprint... Now of course it is important to support local ethical businesses as much as possible, but I also think it's important to combat the larger problem, which is our overwhelming need to buy things in the first place.

For others, however, this appears to function more as a source of distinction and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2013), whereby anti-haulers position themselves as morally superior, 'better' consumers. This also suggests an individualised model of how consumerism works. Although corporations are often the target of anti-consumerism given their visibility and influence (Klein, 1999; Stolle and Micheletti, 2015), here corporations are represented as 'tricking' consumers into buying. Williamson (2019b) describes people 'going broke' for a make-up release as being 'brainwashed', and even describes a beauty influencer launching a product as 'gaslighting' her audience. In this framing it is only savvy, smart consumers who are able to rise above the noise and make the 'right' consumer choices. Hedrick's (2019b) video title – 'Makeup No Buy Tips: Secret Ways Companies Get Your Money' – is indicative of this kind of framing of corporations as sneaky, manipulative, and even abusive.

Overall then, the politics of anti-hauls are not consistent, representing a range of intentions and approaches. While some vloggers capture a kind of collective individualism by taking a personal approach to political problems, others see consumption through an individualistic lens in which 'there is little room to ponder institutions... or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power' (Maniates, 2001: p.33). However, this should not lead us to dismiss their politics out of hand. Humphreys emphasises that a focus on more immediate 'individual self-fulfilment and the cultivation of an attitude of care' need not necessarily obscure larger goals for ecological and social justice (Humphreys, 2010: p.51).

Anti-hauls represent a form of anti-consumerism that recognises that, in consumer capitalism, it may not be achievable to *wholly* resist or refuse consumerism. Moreover, while beauty products may not seem like necessities, consumption of them is often integral to the performance of femininity, particularly of the kind celebrated in social media influencer cultures. Rather than holding anti-haulers to a potentially unachievable standard of 'ideal' anti-consumerism, this paper maintains that a position of critical solidarity and generosity (Humphrey, 2010: p.14) towards their attempts to critique and seek alternatives to the celebration and promotion of excessive consumerism might be more politically productive.

Moreover, to dismiss the political capacity of anti-hauls may suggest a reductively 'narrow' 'masculine' definition of both the 'public sphere and of the political' (Thomas, 2008: p.696). This kind of anti-consumerism could mobilise those who may be less engaged by a 'language more explicitly redolent of 'politics'' (Binkley and Littler, 2008: p.525). As Sandlin and Milam argue (2008), culture jamming interventions can provide spaces for 'political learning' through fun, enjoyable collective experience, such as through a staged parade by the 'Church of Stop Shopping' in New York, or the handing out of satirically altered promotional tissue packs in Tokyo. These actions seek to engage shoppers in ways that may seem more accessible and fun than other forms of activism. Culture jamming is a technique that understands and concedes to the 'emotional regime' of consumer culture, using laughter and entertainment as a point of mobilisation (Wettergren, 2009), and responding to the 'complexities of consumer identity, affect and desire' (Littler, 2005: p.229). The politics of anti-hauls must be understood as imperfect, 'partial', 'unfolding' and 'plural' (Humphrey, 2010: p.173), then, but they also offer possibilities for political learning, personal and collective transformation, and alternative pleasures outside of continual consumer accumulation.

### **Creativity and other pleasures**

Anti-haulers offer more than criticism alone. Some vloggers also celebrate and promote forms of creativity and resourcefulness that offer pleasurable alternatives to accumulation. Like other successful culture jamming strategies, these kinds of videos do not only endeavour to stop or halt the flow of consumer messages, but to channel energies into collective and individual creativity and cultural production, a practice that Sandlin and Milam describe as a 'political poetics' (2008).

These videos involve sharing ideas to creatively (re)ignite interest in existing make-up collections. YouTube channel 'Thrifty Beauty' (n.d) focuses on strategies to use a smaller range of products, with series such as 'Pan that Palette' – using up (known as 'panning') one palette of eyeshadow over a series of videos. A number of vloggers participate in '#Projectpan' challenges that focus on using up existing make-up collections in creative ways, focusing on application technique and style (Too Much Tash, 2019). Similarly, RawBeautyKristi (2019) speaks about 'slowing down' and 'really getting a lot of joy out of using the things I really love'. These efforts align with Clark's vision of beauty products and practices becoming 'less connected to our insecurities... and more connected to the act or craft of making or creating something' (Clark, 2016). This reflects culture jamming calls to participate in acts of production and creation to replace and go beyond consumer pleasures (Lekakis, 2017).

These examples celebrate make-up craft and skill, often viewed dismissively from the outside (Black, 2004). Moreover, the emphasis on creative strategies suggests that anti-hauls could represent an 'alternative to dominant conceptions of fulfilment... grounded in an already-existing structure of feeling' (Soper, 2008: p.576). As such, they offer what Soper calls 'alternative hedonism' (2008). Soper argues that, for a post-consumerist consensus to be achieved, a new model for contentment, happiness and

the 'good life' must replace our consumption-based paradigm. Anti-hauls, as a form of algorithmic culture jamming, offer the possibility of the 'liberation of desire' from the cycle of continual consumption (Wettergren, 2009). This is not only involves highlighting the boredom and need for 'something else' that is generated by unsustainable consumer culture, but channelling desire into alternative sources of fulfilment (Wettergren, 2009).

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to capture the ambivalent and contradictory politics of anti-consumer influencers. At some points anti-haul discourses appear apolitical and individualistic, while at others they contain moments of collective individualism (Humphrey, 2010) or alternative hedonism (Soper, 2008), even if they fall short of offering a sustained systemic critique of capitalism (Lekakis, 2017). By highlighting these contradictions, I do not intend to deride or dismiss the efforts of anti-haul vloggers and, by extension, anti or ethical consumer influencers across social media. In many ways, the ambivalence explored reflects the impossibilities of our current social and political juncture. Faced with the realities of unsustainable consumer capitalism, consumers might respond through activism, anxiety or apathy (Verlie, 2019), or by seeking flawed solutions within the structures of consumer capitalism itself (Littler, 2008). Framed within this context, it would be churlish to condemn the imperfect politics of anti-haul vloggers, and this paper instead takes a position of critical solidarity towards their often partial and contradictory efforts.

Anti-haulers and other anti and ethical consumer influencers demonstrate a novel way to navigate an important challenge: how to make anti-consumerism visible and popular on platforms that are algorithmically governed and organised to favour commercial, entertaining, engaging content. This paper has demonstrated that culture jamming techniques, through which promotional communication is harnessed for the spreading of anti-consumer messages that mirror the emotional register of consumerism (Wettergren, 2009), are being remixed and reinvented by anti-consumer influencers practicing algorithmic optimisation on YouTube. Like other culture jamming strategies, anti-hauls can easily be folded into consumer centric discourses. At the same time, this use of algorithmic culture jamming creates a potentially important, hopeful, engaging space for political learning and collective individual transformation.

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<sup>i</sup> Clark is referred to using feminine pronouns throughout. Although Chris Giarmo (who performs as Kimberly Clark in drag) is a cisgender man, Clark's YouTube channel is almost wholly performed in her feminine drag persona.

<sup>ii</sup> The trope of 'rehab' draws on an idea of over-consumption as individualised pathology or 'addiction', rather than positioning continual accumulation and waste as a fundamental requirement of consumer capitalist growth imperatives (Reith, 2018).

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